Professor Ralph Levering

To walk into the classroom of the professor we honor today is to enter a community of learners where the pursuit of truth through rigorous analysis and debate flourishes in an atmosphere of respectful collegiality, where the vehement learn to listen and even the most reticent find their voice. Debates, role playing, discussion, guest speakers and film footage provide the lenses through which students analyze and interpret the lessons of the past. Modeling their behavior after their professor, students learn to listen with respect and to evaluate all voices. These actively engaged students come away with more than just a deeper understanding of the past; they find themselves equipped with what one former student has called “a mental toolkit for evaluating life.”

This professor’s support for his students is legendary: hours spent in his office, discussing student research with genuine interest, eagerly helping students refine and communicate their ideas. They write in awe of his ability to know just what each needs: the shy student overcomes a fear of public speaking by introducing a visiting lecturer; the anxious freshman gets a call assuring him he did well on his first exam; the hospitalized sophomore looks up to see his professor at his bedside; the blocked thesis writer is led to look
patiently at different angles of attack; the senior torn between two appealing career options hears an honest appraisal of his particular strengths and weaknesses.

Our honoree epitomizes the behaviors he demands from his students. A student writes: “It was not uncommon for him to open a class on Friday morning with a discussion of his further reflection on a student’s comments made in class on Wednesday.” Another adds, “He respects all points of view, but expects them to be well researched and tightly argued.” His lively rigor is contagious. “Often,” writes another student, “class discussion would spill over to conversations between students after class. Indeed, the questions he raises are not easily answered, for instance: what actions of a nation are just and when are those actions justified? Examining them taught us a lot about values, our own and others, and about how to think in an organized manner.”

While students learn to listen, evaluate, and respond thoughtfully, they also learn to apply political lessons to their personal lives and look inward, to conduct what one student called an “internal audit: what are my goals? What are my values? What matters?” An alumnus writes that this professor shapes “young
people to think critically without being critical, and to weigh what it takes for people to live in a community.”

Even as his intellect animates the room, his wonderful sense of humor and gentle nature puts students at ease. One praises his “ability to make students feel comfortable with themselves both inside and outside of the classroom.” Another recalls his first class at Davidson: “At just past 8:30 on a steamy August morning, I sat nervously expectant amongst a throng of upperclassmen in Chambers 329. Needless to say, intimidation had my heart beating a bit faster than normal.” When this professor walked in, he continues, “my first layer of ‘scared’ was peeled off.”

This professor ‘peels off layers of scared’ by his very presence. One word, writes an alumnus, characterizes him: “Peace. It drapes him. He has honed the quality in himself and cultivates the trait in those who enter into his sphere of influence.” Perhaps this pervading aura of peace is all the more remarkable because this professor’s specialty is the history of the Cold War, a foil that throws into even higher relief his spirit of free exchange and community. His radiating peace heartens, his passionate enthusiasm motivates, his brilliance inspires his students to, as a colleague writes, “see their
own promise and stretch themselves,” corroborating the praise of the student who writes “In [his] classroom, I became even more me.”

For your dedication and commitment, for your ability to make learning exciting, and because, as a student writes, you are “really cool” we honor you, Professor Ralph Levering, with the 2006 Hunter-Hamilton Love of Teaching Award.

[citation J. Neumann]